



## Protect Your Personal Information – Even When You No Longer Need It

Protecting your privacy means protecting your personal information, even when you don't need it any longer. Think before you toss those documents in the trash or give away your old computer.

### Destroying Digital Data

When it's time to upgrade to a new computer, you can opt to sell, donate or recycle your old one. But first, make sure that your sensitive personal information – like bank records, credit card numbers, passwords, tax records, medical information – has been completely removed.

Deleting a document on your computer by using your “delete” key doesn't remove it from your hard drive. When you press “delete,” the operating system only removes the reference to the file from the directory. It's like crossing out a chapter title from the table of contents in a book. Even though the title is gone, the chapter still remains in the book. Someone using file recovery software can find the deleted files on your hard drive and access the personal information you thought you'd completely deleted.

Here are tips on permanently removing sensitive data from your hard drive.

- 1. Use secure deletion software to erase your hard drive.**

If you choose to donate your computer to a school or charity, or if you resell it, you should securely erase your hard drive first. Software to permanently erase data by overwriting it multiple times is available in computer stores and online, including some free programs.

- 2. Destroy your hard drive.**

If you're not donating or selling your old computer, you may opt to physically destroy your hard drive. You may be able to do this yourself, with a sledge hammer for example. Many shredding companies have the equipment to grind up or tear apart hard drives, rendering them useless.

- 3. Bring your computer to an e-waste recycling facility.**

If you've decided to discard your computer, you can find a facility equipped to recycle electronic waste (also known as e-waste) at [www.e-recycle.org](http://www.e-recycle.org). This web site is maintained by the California Integrated Waste Management Board and allows you to search for a recycler in your area. The database includes recyclers that accept other electronic devices that contain personal information, including PDAs and cell phones.

## Shred It But Don't Forget It!

By now, most of us know to protect against identity theft by shredding bank records and other sensitive paper documents that contain personal information. You can take large quantities of documents to a free shred event in your local community. Or you can use your own cross-cut shredder. But after you've filled your shredder, what should you do with the shreds?

Contact your local recycling service and ask if it accepts shredded paper for recycling. If not, there are a number of ways you can reuse your paper shreds. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- 1. Replace bubble wrap or styrofoam peanuts.**  
Use your shredded paper as packing material in moving boxes, for mailing breakables, and to store fragile household items like china or holiday decorations.
- 2. Mix shreds into your compost pile.**  
Combine two parts shredded paper with one part grass in your home composting pile, or add the shreds to a worm bin. As it breaks down, the paper will add needed carbon and nitrogen to the compost pile.
- 3. Make mulch.**  
Use shredded paper as mulch in your garden or flower bed. Spread the paper shreds about three to six inches deep around plants, then water the paper. Cover the wet shredded paper with topsoil, compost, pine straw or wood chips to help keep the shreds from flying away or drying out.
- 4. Use for pet cage bedding.**  
Contact your local animal shelter or veterinary clinic and ask if they accept donations of shredded paper for pet bedding. The paper shred bedding can be used for hamsters, gerbils, rabbits, guinea pigs, and other small animals.
- 5. Try a craft project.**  
How about saving energy and money by making a draft stopper for your window sills or doors? Sew the sides and one end of an old bath towel together, creating a tube. Turn the tube inside out, stuff with plenty of shredded paper, and sew the end closed. Or try stuffing paper shreds into the feet of cut pantyhose, tie a knot at the end, and put them in sneakers for homemade odor eaters.

## Resources

The Electronic Frontier Foundation has information on secure deletion, including recommendations of free software that can be downloaded: <https://ssd.eff.org/tech/deletion>.

A *PC World* video covers a number of ways to wipe personal information from your hard drive: [www.pcworld.com/article/157126/how\\_to\\_completely\\_erase\\_a\\_hard\\_drive.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/157126/how_to_completely_erase_a_hard_drive.html).

For more privacy tips, see the California Office of Privacy Protection's web site: [www.privacy.ca.gov](http://www.privacy.ca.gov).